

Digital selves, digital scholars: Theorising academic identity in online spaces

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As the digital world becomes enmeshed with our physical world, identities become public by default, and this can have disastrous consequences for those whose digital identities are deemed socially unacceptable. For scholars, considerations of public identity are especially critical, as academia functions in many ways as a reputational economy (Willinsky, 2010). Thus, while concerns over digital footprint are widespread amongst the general population, they become particularly pressing for academics, but avoiding digital spaces entirely is increasingly a non-viable option as institutions of higher education expand into digital domains. As well, there are many affordances made possible by various forms of digital scholarship (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2012). Many scholars are therefore tasked with the necessity of navigating a digital culture that is quick to judge and reluctant to forgive.

In this paper, we theorise the ontological foundations of (digital) identity in order to better understand the complexity of academics' online participation. We explore the conceptualization of identity as fixed and unitary or as a coherent whole from which we might select 'acceptable identity fragments' to present in public online spaces (Kimmons and Veletsianos, 2014). Then, employing a poststructural lens, we theorise the effects of such a modernist epistemology on digital identity and scholarship, including the repercussions of seeing identity as fixed, unitary, and controllable on diverse digital phenomena: cultural hysteria around the permanence of digital footprints; a decreased collective capacity for forgiveness as we lose the ability to forget past misdeeds (Ambrose, Friess,

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and Van Matre, 2012); increasing occurrences of cybervigilantism in response to acts taken out of context (Ronson, 2015). Finally, we theorise the possibilities and challenges offered by a reimagining of digital selfhood in poststructural terms, as fluid, never complete, and conferring a constrained agency.

Keywords

Digital identity, scholarship, modernism, poststructuralism, networks

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Introduction

In 1993, Peter Steiner published a cartoon in the *New Yorker*; the cartoon, which went on to be the most reproduced in the history of the magazine, shows two dogs, one of whom is using a computer. The caption reads: 'On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog' (Cavna, 2013). Though the cartoon was created in the (relatively) early days of the internet, it sums up one of the key difficulties, and possibilities, of online spaces: digital identity[†] is complex and slippery.

Given these complexities, it is not surprising that missteps and poor choices made online can result in public humiliation, job-loss, and various forms of cyber-vigilantism; one famous instance is the case of Justine Sacco's racist tweet (Pilkington, 2013), which went viral while she was on a flight and cost her her job as a PR executive, while Ronson (2015) has collected a book full of various instances of cyber-shaming. Indeed, entire online communities have sprung up with the sole purpose of finding and publicly shaming the perpetrators of various misdeeds; one such Tumblr site, titled 'Racists Getting Fired,' is designed to track down and notify the employers of people who have posted racist comments online. For those in particular professions, however, the surveillance of digital identity is further amplified. Teachers' online identities, for instance, are often subject to much greater scrutiny due to their positions as role models for youth (Hildebrandt, forthcoming), and rules for 'appropriate' online presence can be quite strict, as is evident in the case of a Georgia teacher who was fired for posting a picture showing herself holding two alcoholic beverages on her private Facebook profile (Sullivan, 2011). Indeed, Veletsianos (2014) notes that pre-service teachers often share what he terms an 'acceptable identity fragment' while the future teachers still see such identities as 'authentic,' they are 'intentionally limited and structured' to present a particular impression (para. 5).

[†] The term identity is itself contested and could be the subject of a much longer exploration, but we have chosen to use this term, rather than, for instance, subjecthood, both for ease of understanding (as it is commonly used in the literature around our online selves) and because, as we argue below, it aligns with the current prevailing understanding of digital selfhood).

Similarly, the complexity of digital identity has striking ramifications for academics and scholars as they venture increasingly into online spaces: while this complexity was often previously circumvented through an avoidance of online spaces, such a strategy is increasingly both impractical and disadvantageous as institutions, and society in general, become enmeshed with digital practice and culture.

In this paper, we theorise the complexity of scholarly digital identity as it relates to broader social and cultural theories. Beginning with an overview of the role of the online world in culture, we underline the importance of scholars' engagement in the digital realm. We then explore the modernist framework that permeates our cultural engagement with the idea of digital selfhood so as to comprehend the implications of this worldview on the landscape of higher education. Finally, we theorise the possibilities and challenges offered by a reimagining of digital selfhood in poststructural[‡] terms in order to ask what such a reimagining might mean for academia in our increasingly digital world.

Understanding our digital world

In today's world, one might argue that the internet is mandatory. Technology, and the connectedness that it enables, has become a ubiquitous presence in our daily lives, so much so that it is hard to escape even if one tries; indeed, in 2011, internet access was declared a human right by the United Nations (Jackson, 2011). In this digital reality, Marshall McLuhan's contention that 'we shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us' (Lapham, 1994, p. xxi) is evinced in myriad aspects of our daily lives: our increasing connectedness has profoundly altered the ways in which we work and relate to each and has led, at the very least, to many cultural shifts, and perhaps even to a complete paradigm shift (Cross, 2011, referencing Thomas Kuhn). For instance, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) note that relationships are changed by digitally-mediated communications: 'They have a different tenor from face-to-face relationship: They are often fleeting; they are easy to enter into with a few mouse clicks; and they are easy to leave, without so much as a goodbye. But they are also perhaps enduring in ways we have yet to understand' (p. 32-33). This shift is evident in our intimate relationships, where dating is now frequently marked by status changes on Facebook and where the ever-present memories on social media make breaking up a more complicated process (Bilton, 2014), so much so that some couples have turned to social media clauses in

[‡] Lather (2001) and others differentiate between ludic and resistance postmodernism (which for our purposes may be taken here as largely synonymous with post-structuralism), where the former is focused on relativism and 'the playfulness of the signifier' (p. 479) and the latter offers possibilities for emancipatory democracy. Lather notes, importantly, the post-structuralism 'is about complicating reference, not denying it, through a profound vigilance regarding how language does its work' (p. 479); thus, instead of offering up a different worldview, post-structuralism asks us to question and deconstruct existing ones. In this paper, we use the term poststructuralism to denote a theoretical framework that aligns with Lather's definition of resistance postmodernism and includes a critical element.

their prenuptial agreements (Roy, 2014). Digital communications have also changed even practices such as mourning, with some arguing that our global relationships have removed the centrality of physical proximity in the process of grief (Bruenig, 2014) and others noting that the persistence of digital artefacts can complicate our ability to move beyond mourning (Buntin, 2014).

Given the far-reaching implications of digital culture, it is not surprising that these changes affect the realm of education as well. In terms of learning, access to the internet provides an immense wealth of information; our current age of the digital economy is 'defined by the abundance of knowledge and participants as opposed to their scarcity' (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, and Cormier, 2010, p. 8). The internet has 'vastly expanded access to all sorts of resources, including formal and informal educational materials' and has led to cheaper, freer access to content (Brown and Adler, 2008). In a culture of rapid transmission, words and images 'flit about at the speed of light and procreate with indecent rapidity, not arborially . . . as in a centralized factory, but rhizomatically, at any decentered location' (Poster, 2001, p. 78). In such a culture, there is growing recognition that learning can be done anywhere, at anytime, and by anyone (Johnson, Adams, and Haywood, 2011); moreover, thanks to Web 2.0 tools such as blogs and social media, anyone with access to the internet can contribute to the fount of global knowledge.

Academia in a digital world

The shift in culture brought about by the ever-expanding digital realm has affected higher education as well; Stewart (2013) notes that learning management systems such as Blackboard and Moodle have been adopted in many university settings and are used to allow for online and blended instruction with varying degrees of openness; as well, the rise of the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) movement in recent years coincides with the growing demand for online courses and increased awareness of the implications of knowledge abundance for institutions of higher education.

Just as institutions have entered the realm of the digital, scholars face the same push into online worlds. Indeed, given the extent to which our on- and offline lives are now enmeshed, separation of the two has become largely impractical; in fact, absence from online spaces can be a disadvantage and may even be perceived as suspicious (Hill, 2012). Marshall (2015) argues that for academics in particular, adopting a *laissez faire* attitude about digital identity can be particularly problematic, as search engines will default to potentially unflattering sites such as Rate My Professor: she notes that 'if you do not have a clear online presence, you are allowing Google, Yahoo, and Bing to create your identity for you.'

Moreover, beyond the disadvantages of *not* having a positive digital footprint, there are many positive affordances made possible by the purposeful development of an online identity and engagement in digital scholarship (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2011). Participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) - that is, a culture in which we are all

potentially both consumers *and* creators of content - has begun to extend into higher education, so that scholarly research is no longer simply disseminated downwards from the ivory tower. Rather, Stewart (2013) argues that academics might use social media to 'cultivate scholarly identities, networks, and audiences via online participation' (p. 4). Such engagement in online spaces allows scholars to take advantage of the 'strength of weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) by extending their networks of ideas and people beyond the local and immediate; rather than being limited to a particular institutional or intellectual context, academics can use social media to connect to scholars globally as well as to those outside of the realm of academia.

Despite the aforementioned factors that necessitate (or at the very least highly recommend) scholars' participation in online spaces, however, the digital landscape remains an uncharted frontier for many in academia. Certainly, there are myriad reasons for scholars' absence in the online context; recent work by Stewart (2015), for instance, explores the complex processes of reputation-making in online scholarly networks, while other more mundane factors such as lack of digital skills contribute to the issue as well. In this paper, however, we turn to the underlying modernist ontological frameworks that underpin our understandings of digital spaces in order to better comprehend the effects of these ontological perspectives on digital scholarly identity; to begin, we take a more in-depth look at the complexities of identity both on- and offline.

Identity: Ontological perspectives

In the years since the internet has come into widespread use, we have seen its myriad effects on the way that we collectively understand culture and identity. Poster (2001) notes that the very nature of technology is decentring and that digital culture has in some respects changed the very ways in which we structure our conception of the self. The internet allows for a proliferation of stories; it breaks down the idea of communication as 'few to many,' substituting a 'many to many' model where anyone with sufficient access can (theoretically) be heard. At the same time, technology removes, very obviously, the relationship between referent and referred (or signified and signifier, to invoke Derrida), as communications can be anonymous and are mediated by a screen. McLuhan (1960) sees this breakdown as a fundamental change brought by the 'electrical age;' he remarks that activities such as speaking on the radio disconnect us from our bodies and change our relationship to the world, so that digital culture has 'deprived people really of their public identity.' Poster, moreover, notes that the very term 'virtual reality,' which emerged in the digital era, is a particularly notable example of this troubling breakdown, because it implies that 'reality may be multiple or take many forms' (p. 78); the use of 'artificial reality' in some circles is an

attempt to demarcate the offline world as the 'real' one, but he argues that there is no denying the multiple nature of reality in the digital age.

Moreover, as we have moved into the era of mobile devices, location has become decentred as well, so that we are increasingly global beings. Wellman (2002) argues that as barriers of space and time have been broken down by technology, we have moved from discrete, local groupings to more fluid, complex, 'diffuse, variegated' networks that are less space-specific (p. 1). In such an era, communications no longer rely on fixed places; as Wellman puts it, 'It is I-alone that is reachable wherever I am: at a house, hotel, office, freeway or mall. The person has become the portal' (p. 5). Our self is no longer tied, in the same way it once was, to stable referents of location.

Digital spaces, modernism, and the reclamation of 'authenticity'

The many decentring forces of technology are destabilizing to a modernist ontology; new possibilities of online play and performance suggest that identity might well be multiple, fluid, and even malleable to the will of the individual, and this introduces troubling complexities to the way that we think of the self. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that much of the popular narrative surrounding online identity clings to a modernist ontology (as described below), in an apparent desire to reclaim the notion of 'authentic' identity.

A modernist ontology is based in a particular conception of the subject, which stems, ultimately, from the Cartesian emphasis on reason and the notion of the cogito (that is, we are human because of our capacity for rational thought)[§]. In such a worldview, the humanist subject is seen as an agentic producer of knowledge and change; moreover, s/he has a fixed, unitary pre-given self or core identity that is essentially unchangeable (Henriques, 1998; Venn, 1998). S/he is 'conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous, and ahistorical. . . [with a] singular, unified, and atomic core' (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). In addition, the humanist view of the subject is organised around binary oppositions, so that the 'fundamental opposition of self/other, subject/object, and identity/difference' becomes critical to the core identity that an individual possesses (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). The foundational nature of these binaries in modernist thought leaves little room for identities that shift or that fall somewhere in the midst of an opposing pair, so that we are either male or female, white or black, good or bad; moreover, implicit in these binary categories is a value judgment, where one member of the pair is dominant and the other is marginalized.

Given the way in which online identities run counter to a modernist view of the subject, much of the literature (and indeed, the popular understanding) around digital

[§] Note that while there are certainly differences between the modernist and humanist subjects, the central element (that is, the idea of a fixed, rational subject) is common to both; it is this quality of the subject that is of interest to us here.

spaces tends towards ‘digital dualism’ (Jurgensen, 2011), that is, the idea that online relationships, spaces, and selves are seen as less ‘real’ than those in the offline world. In such a world, our ‘real world’ identity is often conceived of as fixed and unitary or as a coherent whole, whereas our online selves are made up of some self-selected elements of the whole. This conception of online spaces makes it possible to retain the underlying modernist worldview while simply conceiving of the digital sphere as a disconnected and false space. However, while adopting a view of digital dualism is comforting in that it allows us to put off the disruption of the ‘authentic’ self, it creates a number of problems for those trying to build a digital identity. In particular, the idea of a singular authentic identity is troubling for those trying to present professional selves online: seeing identity as fixed precludes the ability to make mistakes or to demonstrate evidence of imperfections online, and it may lead to the desire to select ‘acceptable identity fragments’ to present in public online spaces (Kimmons and Veletsianos, 2014). As well, when our understanding of identity is bound up in binary oppositions, every perceived piece of ‘identity’ displayed online is taken to hyperbole and seen as an absolute indication of character and beliefs.

Scholarly identity in digital networks

Given the complexities inherent in digital identity, it is perhaps unsurprising that the uptake of digital scholarship has been slow, despite the push towards online spaces. Even in face-to-face settings, academia is a reputational economy (Willinsky, 2010); this is doubly true of academic networks in digital spaces, where scholars’ institutional reputational identities do not immediately equate to online influence (Stewart, 2013). While networked publics - that is, spaces created through the interactions of people via networked technologies (boyd, 2011) - offer many possibilities, they ‘demand the construction, performance and curation of intelligible public identities as a price of admission’ (Stewart, 2013, p. 6). Stewart notes, however, that ‘the immersive literacies...and strategies by which reputations, status, and positions are created and circulated in networked environments remain tacit and unarticulated’ (p. 44), thus making the digital sphere difficult to navigate.

Additionally, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) note that while our identities are now shaped in large part by ‘intentional digital contributions’ such as blogs, YouTube videos, or social networking profiles (p. 23), inequalities arise due to gaps in technology access. This digital divide means that those without access are less able to control their identities because they are not always able to contribute digitally and therefore rely on what others say about them online. Indeed, in a variety of ways, other people’s perceptions of our digital identities are largely beyond our personal control, which adds another layer of difficulty for scholars who hope to present themselves online in professional ways.

For scholars, issues of identity are particularly problematic particularly when it comes to the ability to speak to controversial or difficult issues. Indeed, while the

tenure system is intended to protect scholars' academic freedom, it cannot protect scholars from cyber-vigilantes who take every post or tweet as an indelible marker of character. In recent months, we have seen considerable backlash when academics have chosen to speak about socio-cultural issues on social networks, as in the cases of Sarah Goldrick-Rab (Jaschik, 2015) and Steven Salaita (Guarino, 2014). There exists a profound risk, then, that the climate of digital culture, where identity is perceived not as shifting or context dependent, but rather as an expression of a core self, may lead academics to self-censor and in turn bring out a silencing of important conversations.

Re-imagining identity, from fixed to fluid: Poststructuralism and the subject

If a modernist conception of identity is problematic, what, then, might be made possible by the re-imagination of identity in post-structural terms? Indeed, the decentring forces of technology would seem well-aligned with a poststructural conception of identity as fluid and shifting, and there are myriad examples to support the argument that identity in online space is (and has been) easily conceived of as shifting, partial, and performative but still 'real' (as opposed to being merely a poor echo of our 'authentic' offline selves. Early discourses of the web stressed the new possibilities offered by online spaces for a fluid understanding of the self (c.f. Poster, 2001; Turkle, 1997). For instance, in her earlier work, Turkle (1997) wrote extensively about identity play in digital spaces. She argued that new media had changed 'our very identities' (p. 9), particularly in the way that it led to 'eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual' (p. 10), and she noted that the line between human and technology became harder to distinguish as much of our lives were lived onscreen (Turtle, 1997). Because of this blurring of lines, she argued that 'computers brought philosophy into everyday life' (p.x) by asking us to question the very nature of identity in a world where technology looked increasingly human.

Additionally, Papacharissi (2012) views the presentation of self in social networks as inherently bound up in performance, and argues that networked technologies have led to a multiplicity of conflicting selves. As well, many features of digital culture suggest (as McLuhan did) that our very selves are being shaped by the characteristics of the online world, which counter view of identity that rests on the idea of a fixed core being. boyd (2014) notes that social media, and social networks in particular, are 'actively shaping and being shaped by contemporary society' (p. 26), and Wesch (2008) remarks that each new platform, be it Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn, provides a new way of thinking about and relating to others. Through their structured modes of communication and profile creation, these spaces dictate, to a certain extent, the ways in which we are able to interact; this is a central element of Lanier's (2011) argument regarding the dangers of digital platforms: that they will lock in certain ways of being, to the exclusion of others. Moreover, social networking sites

can actually shape the ways in which others view the digital identities that we are cultivating. For instance, Facebook uses a complex algorithm to determine which posts are visible on users' timelines, so that 'If the algorithm is designed to systematically 'demote' one's posts about world affairs and 'promote' one's meme posts, over time one start to look more like a person obsessed with memes and less like a person interested in world affairs' (Millar, 2014).

Understanding the postmodern/poststructural subject

So what might this poststructural digital self look like? While the modernist individual is seen to possess a fixed, core identity and is a 'self-centred, constitutive agent of its history and of history generally' (Henriques, 1998, p. xii), a poststructural understanding of the subject, and a Foucauldian one in particular, deconstructs this common sense view and re-imagines the subject as discursively and continually constituted and re-constituted, always-already historically specified and bound up in the interplay of power and knowledge (Henriques, 1998; Foucault, 1980); it is a 'person made in relations of productive power' (Youdell, 2006, p. 48). For Foucault (1990), subjectivation (the coming into being of a subject) is triple in nature: subjects come to be known in relation to particularly truths or discourses, in relation to the techniques of power that act upon them and through them, and in relation to the technologies of the self.

Most important, perhaps, is that a post-structural understanding of the subject presents a major disruption to common sense ways of knowing: Henriques (1998) notes that 'identity as a malleable commodity, or as something that is not naturally determined and fixed, has far reaching implications for the way we understand the relation between nature and culture' and indeed, the world in general (p. xv). In particular, if subjects are constituted through the continued interplay between body and discourse in the midst of a complex, capillary-like network of power (Foucault, 1980), then this implies a self that is constantly changing as our subjecthood is continuously reinscribed.

Additionally, while the modernist subject possesses a degree of agency, the fixed nature of identity in this paradigm constrains the possibilities for what said subject can *be*. In a poststructural understanding of the subject, while selfhood is necessarily bound by discourse and by the technologies of power, there is always the possibility of a degree of agency as subjects exercise self-care and, essentially, speak, think, and write themselves into being in particular ways (though still bound by the desire to be subjectified by certain discourses (Foucault, 1988). However, perhaps due to the negative narratives that surround digital identity, the possibilities for agency are left out as contemporary thinkers (such as those mentioned above) decry the dangerous ways in which our online selves are being manipulated by hidden forces; to be clear, these forces (what Foucault would term dominant discourses and other

technologies of power) exist, but they are tempered by the agency bestowed by subjectivation.

The poststructural academic (digital) self

A poststructural view of identity allows us to see our online selves with the understanding that we are subject to cultural and social discourses of which we are often unaware; such an understanding permits us to view any particular facet of our (digital) identity as representative of who we are a particular time and in a particular context. Perhaps even more importantly, the subject (or our identity) in a poststructural understanding is not unitary and fixed but rather is constituted through the performance of particular discourses; thus, a poststructural theorizing of identity allows for the possibility of agency in taking up particular discourses in order to perform a new and different self. Certainly, our actions are always constrained to some degree by the discourses available to us, but there are still multiple discourses at play in any given situation; thus, we can choose to understand our actions with reference to a variety of discourses, meaning that we are not entirely constrained by our discursive positioning but instead have the ability to shift and mature (Henriques, 1998). This last point is critical, as it means that rather than seeing each piece of online identity as a permanent indicator of our thoughts and beliefs, we can allow for the possibility (and likelihood) of future change.

Such a cultural shift in understanding of identity, from the modernist belief in a fixed and rational being to a more poststructural understanding of the self as shifting and evolving, would be advantageous in many ways. The movement away from an authentic self would allow academics' online selves to be taken as an extension of their offline identities rather than as un-contextualized fragments. Indeed, this view of identity would release, to a degree, both our offline *and* our digital identities from the intense pressures of (self-)surveillance and judgment and allow us as a society to more easily move past particular digital (or analog) 'misdeeds' with the understanding that these need not be taken as permanent signs of our character (or lack thereof). Such a shift in understanding would have profound implications for academic freedom and for digital scholarship.

Of course, a move to poststructural selfhood comes with drawbacks as well. Viewing identity as fluid is dangerous to the status quo (hence the degree to which hegemonic forces operate in unseen and unacknowledged ways). Unpacking the hidden discourses and technologies of power that shape truth and knowledge necessitates a rethinking of our entire worldview, and such a rethinking can be intensely uncomfortable: it requires that we examine the myriad systems that underpin what we view as the norm and how these systems privilege particular groups while marginalizing others (Kumashiro, 2009). Indeed, the many implications of the movement to a poststructural view of the subject are much more profound than can be explored here.

Ultimately, however, while the shift to a poststructural understanding of identity (and, in turn, of the world) is in some ways a more grandiose philosophical undertaking than can be attended to in this paper, in the more narrow terms of scholarly digital identity such a shift in understanding would be a positive one. In particular, turning away from a view of identity as fixed, unchanging, and absolute is critical to maintaining practices of academic freedom and to avoid silencing unpopular opinions as scholars enter the digital world.

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